DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 880 HE 022 421

AUTHOR Cain, Carol; And Others
TITLE Dyslexics at Brown. A Student Perspective. Third Edition.
INSTITUTION Brown Univ., Providence, R.I.
PUB DATE Jun 87
NOTE 26p.
AVAILABLE FROM Dyslexics at Brown, Box 1825, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912 (one copy free, multiple copies $1.00 each).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Deans; Administrative Policy; College Faculty; *College Students; Computer Uses in Education; Counseling Techniques; Curriculum; *Dyslexia; Higher Education; Language Handicaps; *Learning Disabilities; *Perceptual Handicaps; Reading Difficulties; Self Esteem; Study Habits; Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Brown University RI

ABSTRACT

An account of what it means to be a dyslexic student in higher education, put together by a group of Brown students who are dyslexic, is presented in an attempt to make the Brown community aware of dyslexia, its symptoms, and some study strategies for coping with it. Some of the resources that Brown offers its student body are listed. Nine sections focus on the following: (1) definition of dyslexia; (2) classic symptoms (reading, writing difficulties, spelling, speech, oral and written word association, coordination/orientation, memory, concentrating, testing, mathematics, foreign language learning, and psychological barriers); (3) faculty involvement; (4) the Brown curriculum; (5) study for success (general study habits, scheduling, taking notes, reading books, studying for exams, and writing a paper); (6) computer word processing; (7) counseling; (8) deans; and (9) administrative policies. It is noted that though dyslexics are often at a disadvantage in the academic, literate environment, the dyslexia should not be a barrier to getting a liberal arts education. Contains 20 references. (SM)

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DYSLEXICS AT BROWN

A Student Perspective

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2

PREFACE

The Deans are pleased to present this account of what it means to be a dyslexic student in higher education. In a typically enterprising Brunonian way, a group of Brown students, who are dyslexic, pooled their experiences and put together the text that follows. The advice is theirs.

We who are the official advisors thank them for joining us in our efforts to make higher education available to all those who have the capacity and ambition to undertake academic challenges that will strengthen them and make them grow.

Harriet Sheridan
Dean of the College

Single copies of this booklet are available by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope (with *two* first-class stamps) to:

Dyslexics At Brown
Box 1825
Brown University
Providence, RI 02912

Multiple copies are available for $1.00 each by sending a check for the appropriate amount to the same address.

June, 1987 Third Edition
August, 1988, Second Printing

INTRODUCTION

This booklet was written by some of the dyslexic students at Brown in order to make the Brown community – especially incoming freshmen – aware of dyslexia, its symptoms and some study strategies for coping with it. The booklet also lists some of the resources which Brown offers its student body.

In addition to writing this booklet, the students have formed a self-help group called Dyslexics At Brown (DAB). It is the first campus branch of the Orton Dyslexia Society and a member of the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, as well. Its goals are to help identify other dyslexics on campus, to help dyslexics get through college successfully, and to reach out to other campuses to encourage the formation of similar groups.

Among the ways the group tries to help its members is by educating them about dyslexia and ways for compensating for its effects, and advising them of the special ways the university helps them overcome their difficulties. Also, the group is trying to make the faculty and administration more aware of the variation in learning styles of *all* students (not just dyslexics) and to encourage the use of teaching methods to accommodate them.

Many of the students struggling academically through their years at Brown will be dyslexic, but they will never learn to overcome their troubles successfully until

they understand the reasons behind their difficulties. The University and DAB want learning-disabled students to leave Brown with the tools they need to succeed in their adult lives.

DEFINITION

Dyslexic: It doesn't mean you aren't an achiever. It doesn't mean you're stupid or lazy, that you have "minimal brain damage" or severe psychological problems. What it may mean is that you have to train yourself to cope with an organizational and language disability which manifests itself most noticeably in reading and writing, but which affects your life from the most mundane task to the most crucial. The concept of dyslexia is not well-defined. Many writers differentiate among "dyslexia", "dysgraphia", "discalculia", and other learning disabilities.

At Brown we have found it useful to refer to all these information processing disorders by the single term "dyslexia". Many dyslexics also have attention deficit disorder (ADD), which affects their ability to concentrate on tasks for a sustained period of time. ADD and dyslexia are different disorders that often have similar symptoms. Most dyslexics have developmental dyslexia, which means that they have had it since birth. It is also possible to acquire dyslexia through traumatic injury.

What causes dyslexia? Recent research indicates that the brains of dyslexics differ *structurally* from other brains and process information in a distinctive manner. The Orton Dyslexia Society has made this subject a major thrust of its research program. They hope that more knowledge will lead to new therapeutic approaches for helping dyslexics, who

constitute approximately 5 to 10% of the world population.

At the moment, dyslexics cannot look forward to being "cured," but they can learn to compensate for their disability and make use of specific remedial techniques that will strengthen their reading and writing skills. They need not have lower expectations. Here at Brown, a strong and active community of dyslexic students takes the same courses and earns the same degrees as other students in a variety of disciplines, including such heavy-reading concentrations as history and English. Just to have gotten this far in their educations demonstrates that they are intelligent, highly motivated, shrewd and persistent. This means they *can* do what they are willing to try hard enough to do.

Still, dyslexics, no matter what the academic task may be, constantly face an insidious shortage of *time*. Everything takes longer for them, and this results in fatigue and frustration.

Though they can look forward to a period when understanding of dyslexia will be more widespread, dyslexic students know that they – and their brains – are not going to change. It is a realistic concern that their disabilities rather than their talents and strengths (they really do have strengths) may be "noticed," and dyslexics need to learn to deal with this.

CLASSIC SYMPTOMS

The following represents groups of characteristics found among dyslexic students at Brown University. Many students experience some difficulty in a number of these categories. However, dyslexics – for the most part – have trouble in *most* of these areas, though the exact degree varies from

student to student. The most commonly recognized problem is a reading disability. In a dyslexic, this spectrum of problems is symptomatic of a constitutionally determined difficulty in processing certain kinds of information. In a "normal" person who has some of these difficulties, the problems do not reflect a larger disability.

If a student recognizes a good number of the symptoms listed below, he or she should consult Dean Shaw, who may then refer the student for diagnostic testing.

1. READING

—slow reader
—trouble distinguishing between main thesis and supporting evidence
—can't remember what you just read
—reading literally: problems with tone, metaphors and words with more than one meaning (e.g., "there is a *fork* in the road")
—reading out of sequence and omitting words: ("the student went to see the professor" = "the student to the see professor")
—decoding problems: trouble associating letters and their sounds
—often mistaking one word for another ("for" and "from," "to" and "of")
—tracking difficulty: skipping over words or lines when reading
—commonly omitting titles, chapter headings and subheadings
—inevitably experiencing headaches or falling asleep when reading

2. WRITING DIFFICULTIES

—freezing up when trying to write
—difficulty organizing thoughts and papers
—difficulty visualizing a paper's overall topic and formulating a thesis statement
—tendency to focus on specific parts of the paper instead of the overall picture and

how each part relates to the whole
—beautiful sentences in your head vanishing before they can be set down
—"perfect draft" syndrome
—you generally don't catch all your own errors when proofreading
—professors comment that your ideas are great but your mechanics and structure are weak
—difficulty using cursive script, so you usually print (and even that may not be legible), and whether it's cursive or print, you write slowly

3. SPELLING

—reversals: "friend" = "freind," "probably" = "propadly," "0137" = "0317"
—habitually dropping or adding letters and parts of words when writing: "know" = "now"
—unable to spell common, everyday words as well as more difficult words
—letters and words often come out of sequence

4. SPEECH: LISTENING AND SPEAKING

—difficulty pronouncing words
—difficulty getting a point across on first try
—difficulty reading aloud
—stuttering
—hesitancy in speech
—difficulty understanding spoken language

5. ORAL AND WRITTEN WORD ASSOCIATION

—difficulty translating oral speech into written words
—problems with simultaneously taking notes and attending to what's going on in class
—orally a word means one thing, but

written that same word seems to mean something else or nothing at all
—words are heard yet not comprehended

6. COORDINATION/ORIENTATION

—difficulty distinguishing left from right
—difficulty with local geography and directions
—feeling lost in a familiar setting
—becoming confused when going down stairs or passing people — you may even miss steps or stumble despite being a good athlete
—difficulty doing simple mechanical tasks
—never can seem to organize things
—uncoordinated
—hyperactive in order to compensate

7. MEMORY

—difficulty with retention of "common knowledge" items, such as friends' names, names of places, your current age and even what day it is
—difficulty recalling names of things in conversation: frequent use of "this" or "that" or "whatchamacallit" rather than more precise words
—difficulty memorizing a string of numbers or letters in order
—constantly misplacing, losing and forgetting things
—always behind — you seem to live in a time warp

8. CONCENTRATING

—marked difficulty concentrating with noise or people talking in the background
—easily distracted
—difficulty focusing attention
—get tired or overloaded quickly
—unable to do two activities at once (e.g., reading while eating)

9. TESTING

—unable to complete an exam in the allotted time although material was well-understood and well-studied
—blanking out on exams
—difficulty narrowing down a multiple-choice question to one correct response
—perpetually interpreting questions or directions differently from the way the professor intended them

10. MATHEMATICS

—difficulty understanding the wording of a problem
—difficulty doing basic calculations
—reversing numbers

11. FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

—difficulty learning vocabulary
—very slow in oral performance
—no amount of hard work seems to help

12. PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

—it's hard to begin writing a paper because it takes so long to get focused and get thoughts organized
—feeling lazy, stupid or ashamed because of difficulty doing tasks which come so easily to others (low self-esteem)
—feeling constantly behind no matter how hard you try or how much you learn
—feeling that your own work is infantile or crude or otherwise not as good as that of others, and that it's definitely not on the same level as your thinking
—frustrated by unsuccessful attempts to read, write, spell and speak correctly
—feeling as if you are "faking" your education: people say you are smart, but you don't genuinely feel this is true even though you may be getting good grades
—paranoid about deadlines
—fear of filling out forms and applications

and using the telephone
- —isolation: fear of not being understood
- —intensified self-consciousness and stress *because of* your other problems

Some students have found that as they begin to talk with other dyslexics the psychological symptoms begin to diminish. When frustration and fatigue decrease, dyslexic symptoms become less pronounced.

For a first-hand, published account of the struggle which dyslexics must persistently wage, we recommend reading either *Reversals* by Eileen Simpson or *Susan's Story* by Susan Hampshire.

FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

In addition to being able to identify the symptoms just noted, there are other ways faculty members can help. You may notice differences in a student's ability to interpret visual aids and complex diagrams, or to understand the style of teaching, especially if humor, metaphors, intuitive leaps or free-wheeling discussions are hallmarks of your classes. Conversations with a student may reveal that he/she is having trouble grasping the organization of lectures. This problem may be reduced or alleviated by keeping lectures well-structured and by noting (on the blackboard, perhaps) at the beginning of a lecture just what the objectives and structure of the lesson are for that day. The explicit presentation of underlying structure and objectives will also aid students in organizing note-taking, studying for exams and preparing assignments and papers. Reviewing the main points brought up in classroom discussions can help integrate them into the overall organization you intended for the lesson.

Also very helpful are a willingness for personal contact, suggestions for specific study skills relevant to your discipline, and cooperation with a certain amount of a student's experimentation in trying to find a personal learning style for the particular course material. (These practices and attitudes will help not only dyslexic students, but *all* students.)

THE BROWN CURRICULUM

While in college, students are grappling with fresh ideas, different perspectives and new insights. Particularly at Brown, they are able to challenge themselves through self-directed learning and discover effective, personalized modes of learning. The New Curriculum offers multiple options to the motivated college student, many of which are especially helpful to dyslexic students.

For example, the University leaves up to you the decision of what group of courses best serves your academic purposes. You may opt to take as many courses as you wish S/NC: Satisfactory or No Credit. Thus, you can adjust the pace of your undergraduate work and take courses which otherwise you might avoid. You can also enroll in an ambitious five courses one semester and a slower paced three in another. If you wish it, you may request the CAS (Committee on Academic Standing) to put you on a reduced load of two or three courses per semester and pro-rate tuition costs.

You can design an independent concentration or participate in a Group Independent Studies Project (GISP) with some of your peers, focusing on a specific area of knowledge not covered by current course offerings.

Brown also encourages students to take a leave of absence or study abroad for a semester or more. This is a good way to help you figure out how to use the rest of your time at the university most effectively.

The openness and flexibility of Brown are part of what makes our school unique, so we urge you as fellow students to explore all the possibilities.

STUDY FOR SUCCESS

To be successful, a dyslexic student does not need *carte blanche* extensions on papers and untimed exams: he or she needs discipline – a lot of discipline. Not every student – whether dyslexic or not – learns to develop the quality of study habits that it takes to be successful in college. However, for a dyslexic student, a lack of discipline can prove fatal. The following is a compilation of suggestions from successful dyslexic students at Brown on coping with college-level work and developing various academic skills. If you find yourself feeling guilty about requiring extra time on an examination or paper, remember that school is not a race. It is okay to take extra time if it means that you get more out of your education and your entire Brown experience.

GENERAL STUDY HABITS

Because of the attention deficit often related to dyslexia, it is essential to find a quiet place to study (the library, a deserted classroom, etc.). It is also important to get enough sleep, eat well, exercise and take reasonable breaks when studying. Otherwise, dyslexic symptoms are likely to become more pronounced.

SCHEDULING

Having a large desk calendar (or wall calendar) on which to write all due dates for the semester is vital. It's worth noting when your classes are held, not just for attendance, but for preparation: do you have the weekend to prepare or one or two days between classes? And it won't hurt to consider your work habits when you do select your courseload each semester so you can set up a workable schedule. Many people make up weekly and daily work schedules, setting realistic goals and making sure that they accomplish these objectives.

In order to make useful schedules, it is important to be able to assess accurately how long it will take you to do a given task. For instance, one student knows that she generally reads about 15 pages an hour (depending on the density of the material), writes one page in a half hour – actually, it takes her 20 minutes to write a page, with 10 minutes added for procrastination – and types three and a half pages in an hour, pacing herself accordingly.

Other scheduling skills that dyslexics must develop include limiting activities (you can't do everything that interests you), balancing courses (don't take four heavy reading courses in one semester), and most important of all, not fooling yourself by believing that you can finish that paper in the same amount of time as your non-dyslexic friends.

TAKING NOTES

If you have problems taking notes (i.e., you don't think your notes adequately reflect the lectures), here are a few tips:

Sit up front in the classroom. You can see better and it forces you to pay attention, and if you're going to bother going to classes, you might as well know what's going on. What goes along with this is leaving your previous location early enough to *get* a seat up front – five minutes makes a difference.

Develop a critical frame of mind. Don't write down everything the professor says – be discriminating.

Many students develop a personal shorthand of symbols, codewords or abbreviations to speed up note-taking, especially for technical terms or often repeated ones.

If you blank out on something, leave a space and go on. You can come back to it later when you think of it. This goes for exams as well.

Go over your notes right after class to make sure they make sense and add anything significant that you recall but didn't have time to write down.

Right after the lecture, borrow the notebooks of one or two of your non-dyslexic classmates and compare their notes with yours. While the lecture is still fresh in your mind, go over the notebooks – just to make sure that you managed to get all of the important points.

If absolutely necessary, tape-record the lectures – but then you have to budget time to listen to the tapes.

READING BOOKS

Before beginning an assignment, examine the book's title, the chapter and subchapter headings, and the table of contents in order to get an overview of the

major ideas of the book.

Always read the introduction. It usually summarizes the book's thesis. (With technical articles, scan the abstract and summary for an overview of purpose and the significant findings.)

Read actively: take notes, write in the book's margin, and *selectively* underline and highlight (in different colored markers) while reading.

There are effective techniques for improving reading and writing skills — we don't mean speedreading, but basic reading skills. This is something you might want to work on with a trained reading therapist or tutor throughout the school year or intensively during a summer.

Recordings for the Blind and *Talking Books* might be useful. These organizations record educational books of your choice. You pay the mailing expenses and must allow several weeks for the whole process. Information on what texts are included in their libraries is available through Dean Shaw's office.

STUDYING FOR EXAMS

There are, of course, many ways to study for an exam. The value of memorizing your class notes from cover to cover is debatable, but many students find that reviewing notes alleviates tension and facilitates the recall of examples and details.

Flash cards and study guides serve well both as organizing and studying tools. Outlining and summarizing your notes in colored markers are great ways to study. Going over past exams can also be useful.

Many people find it helpful to get together with their classmates several days before the exam (long before anyone has seriously started studying) and talk about the exam and the topics that the course has covered in order to devise some kind of framework to aid later studying.

Teaching assistants can also help you to orient yourself for exams, especially if you seek their help well before exam time.

WRITING A PAPER

The hardest thing about writing a paper is getting started. Here is a little friendly advice (the easy-to-say, hard-to-do kind of advice):

Don't fall into the trap of trying to make your rough draft perfect. If you're having problems getting started, just write anything, no matter how bad you think it is. You can edit it later.

Don't procrastinate: you're not going to be inspired. Eventually, you're going to have to sit down, think it out and write it.

Many people also find it helpful to talk to someone else or themselves out loud about the paper. It can be useful just to talk into a tape recorder in order to define what you want to say and to make sure that you really know what your paper is to cover.

Developing a technique for writing and structuring a paper is a personal thing. There is, however, at least one feature that successful dyslexics have in common when facing the task of writing a paper: they all have some sort of plan. These vary from being nothing more than a list or flowchart of ideas to strictly detailed outlines, some of which even go so far as to specify how many words or

sentences long each paragraph should be. The key is to consciously develop a planning format that works for *you*.

Lastly, deal with spelling errors. Try to identify the words that you consistently misspell and pay special attention to them when writing. Keeping a list or file of words you constantly misspell will give you an easy reference for checking yourself. Learn to double-check your spelling with a dictionary, which you keep nearby. Get a list of spelling and punctuation rules and *learn* them. Have friends proofread your paper for you or use a computer with a spelling checker.

If a professor or teaching assistant becomes concerned about your writing, he/she may refer you to the Writing Center or a Writing Fellow. Such a referral is not meant as a put-down, but rather, it is designed to ensure that a student has an optimal chance to develop his/her skills in written communication.

The Writing Center, located in Room 206 in the Rockefeller Library, is staffed by students who are familiar with the diverse writing needs of students. The center has a useful collection of books and articles on rhetoric, grammar, organization and dyslexia. Many students have found that bringing rough drafts of a paper into the Writing Center helps them to organize that paper and helps them to organize future papers as well.

The Rose Writing Fellows are a talented group of students from various concentrations who have undergone an intensive writing seminar. A list of courses in which Writing Fellows assist the professor is available each semester. If your writing skills are weak, you may wish to enroll in at least one of these courses each semester.

There often are Writing Fellows who have special training and experience in helping dyslexic students. Ask Dean Shaw for a referal to one of these Fellows.

COMPUTER WORD PROCESSING

Many dyslexics have found a word processor to be a wonderful tool to help them master the process of writing. Since a computer has the potential of helping you with your writing for the rest of your life, you may want to consider buying your own personal computer. You may do it on your own or you may choose one of the models on sale at the Brown computer store at considerable discounts. It will be yours forever, and you won't have to wait in line to use it.

If you choose not to purchase your own computer, there are several computer clusters on campus where you can use an Apple Macintosh, IBM PC, or SCRIPT on Brown's mainframe computer. The Computer Center offers minicourses each semester on various computer applications. You can get the schedule at the business office in the Computer Center.

Keep in mind that the lines for computers are long during midterm and finals period and that the mainframe computer does break down. Plan ahead and start your papers early.

Whatever machine you use, you will find that the ability to revise and reorganize your written work is well worth the effort you spend learning how to use a word-processing program. And the spelling checker alone will greatly improve the appearance of your papers.

COUNSELING

For many dyslexic students, the emotional problems which accompany this "brain dysfunction," the feelings of stupidity and self-doubt, are often worse than dyslexia itself. Here is a brief description of some of the counseling services which Brown offers its student population.

Resident Counselors, upperclassmen who live in freshmen units (and have been briefed on dyslexia), are available to help freshmen deal with any problems or questions, whether social or academic.

Any difficulties with your housing — such as repeated, inconsiderate noise on your hall — should be discussed with your R.C., and if this doesn't help, you may want to contact Mr. Desrochers in Residential Life or Dean Robinson in Faunce House.

Student-to-Student is a peer counseling group you can call if you need to talk to someone other than your R.C.

Thomas Bechtel, the Dean of Undergraduate Counseling (x2661), who personally oversees the Student-to-Student counseling program, would also be glad to arrange a time to discuss things with you if the need arises. His office is on the second floor of Rhode Island Hall.

Psychological Services, located in the same suite of offices as Dean Bechtel's, helps students cope with the stresses of academic life. Dr. Robin Rose, a member of the Psychological Services staff, organizes workshops on survival skills and stress reduction open to all. For further information, call Psychological Services at x3476.

You might also want to check out the Resource Center and the College Venture Program office, both located on the first floor of Rhode Island Hall. Here you can find out about past students' leave-taking experiences, internships, community involvement projects, independent concentrations and so on.

Career Planning Services, located in Pembroke Hall on Meeting Street, has a fine career library and career counselors to help you find out where you might be headed. It may be helpful to tell a counselor that you are dyslexic so that he or she can better advise you.

DEANS

The Deans at Brown are available to help you clarify your goals, career aspirations, academic situation and personal struggles. Here are several who are especially helpful to dyslexics:

Dean Robert Shaw (Rhode Island Hall, Room 101, x2412) coordinates services for dyslexic students and organizes study skills and writing seminars. He is the person to whom you should speak if either you or your professors suspect that you might be dyslexic. He can then refer you to a qualified language consultant for diagnostic purposes.

Dean Perry Ashley (UH 201, x2539) directs the tutoring program at Brown. Graduate and undergraduate students who excel in the area in which you need help will tutor you.

Dean Karen Romer (UH 207, x2411) oversees the approval of independent concentrations.

Dean Robert Ripley (Arnold 124, x2781) advises pre-med students and arranges for special testing conditions for the MCAT when necessary.

Harriet W. Sheridan, English Professor and former Dean of the College is on the Board of Directors of The Orton Dyslexia Society and personally encouraged the development of DAB.

ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES

Brown University was one of the first institutions of higher education to formally acknowledge and try to act upon the problems of dyslexic students. Dyslexic students are not treated differently from other students here. They are expected to meet the same standards as other students, though they may require certain adjustments in the procedures they use in meeting those standards.

If an identifiable group of students requires a particular resource to succeed at Brown, the University attempts to provide it. Our services for dyslexic students are consistent with this policy. As this booklet illustrates, many services designed for all Brown students are particularly helpful for dyslexic students. In addition, certain administrative procedures have been established specifically for dyslexic students.

—Brown employs a specialist in language disorders to diagnose students who may be dyslexic and to offer advice on the particular needs of individual students.

—At the student's request, a note is sent to some or all of the student's professors, suggesting that the student

might profit from untimed examinations, oral examinations, the tape recording of lectures, taking exams alone in a quiet place, or other accommodations in the course procedures.

—A severely dyslexic student may petition to take less than a normal load each semester, completing requirements for the degree in more than four years if necessary. In such cases, the student pays a pro-rated tuition charge each semester.

FINAL WORDS

Though a dyslexic can often perceive things in a new light, in an academic, literate environment, the dyslexic is frequently at a disadvantage. This does not mean that dyslexia should act as a barrier to securing a liberal arts education. On the contrary, if you are identified as being dyslexic and can learn to accept and deal with it, you *can* achieve academic success.

However, dyslexia is not an easy thing to detect. If you've thought in a certain way for your entire life, you learn to believe that your way is the norm. Almost every dyslexic diagnosed as an adult has initially been heard to say, "Do you mean that *most* people don't do that?" It is also not easy to accept because once you've admitted that you're dyslexic, you also recognize that you're never really going to "change."

Dyslexic students are bright, creative and capable people (and if they have gotten into Brown, they are in all likelihood highly motivated and disciplined as well). But, as a dyslexic, you have to accept that you're different — no dumber, no less competent — just different. You work at a different pace because you think in a different way.

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A NOTE OF THANKS

Dyslexics At Brown members would like to acknowledge the warm support of Dean Harriet Sheridan, Dean Robert Shaw, Mrs. Helaine Schupack, Mrs. Marilyn Fox, Mrs. Clelia Heebner and many other interested members of the Brown community, including the few, rare professors who have bravely admitted to having dyslexia themselves.

We welcome inquiries of any person who would like to learn more about this language disorder or the activities of our group. Please write to: Dyslexics at Brown, Box 114, Student Activities Office, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912.

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